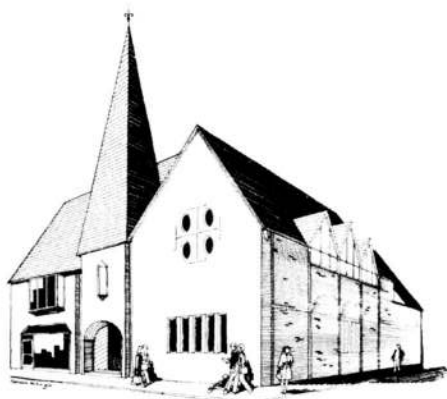


# ROUND THE CHURCHES

## 119: Shankill Road Methodist Church

Drawing: Gordon McKnight

Text: Robin Roddie



Although records of people living in the Shankill area of Belfast date back beyond medieval times (the name Shankill comes from the Irish *Seanchill* meaning 'old church'), the present and familiar shop-lined Shankill Road, stretching 1.5 miles, owes its growth to the rise of the linen industry during the mid to late 19th century.

The first Methodist 'Class' is recorded as meeting 'somewhere in the Shankill' in 1826 and consisted of 24 members, but it wasn't until 1847 that they had their own building, when two houses in Harkin's Court became a Methodist mission hall. It was used until Agnes Street Church was built in 1853. This, in turn, was replaced by a much larger building and school in 1887. Among the notable principals of the Agnes

Street school was Robert Hewitt, whose poet and art critic son, John, captured his early Belfast Methodism upbringing in his sonnet sequence *Kites in Spring – a Belfast Boyhood* (1980).

Unusually, Shankill Road was one of the areas where English Primitive Methodists were strong in Ireland. In 1842 they opened a chapel at the bottom of the Shankill in Melbourne Street. They extended their work further up the Shankill in 1874 by building a church on the present site in Berlin Street.

The Primitives' penchant for open-air preaching hit the headlines in 1881 when three of their ministers were charged with 'indecent' behaviour by walking from Melbourne Street to Berlin Street, leading 300 others singing, 'Hark! The gospel news is sounding.' The charge was dropped on appeal, but it was a time of rising political tensions in the city. In June of 1886 'fearful riots' broke out in Belfast, and for many weeks, were concentrated about the Shankill Road. From the beginning of June to the end of September, at least 90 lives were lost and about 1,000 were wounded.

The English Primitives' last project was the building of a new church on the Shankill Road in 1903 at the front of their Berlin Street premises. Despite this effort, they withdrew from Ireland in 1910, transferring their work to the Irish Conference.

By the 1970s the buzz word was 'Team Ministry', and Shankill was chosen by the

Conference for a pilot scheme which was launched in 1973. As part of the scheme, Agnes Street Church was closed in 1974 and amalgamated with Shankill Methodist. The united congregation moved into the present building, designed by Gordon McKnight Architects in 1984.

Over the years, Shankill Methodists have been in the forefront of peace-making and community activities. In 1962 the Rev Sydney Callaghan purchased 168 Agnes Street to initiate a unique experiment in involved ministry. Later, a Community House, staffed by overseas volunteers, was opened in 1978 in Upper Meenan Street. A Team Ministry shop and restaurant were part of the new Shankill Church, and a greatly expanded ACE scheme did important work in the 1980s.

In 1977, Shankill Road's Saidie Patterson was presented with the first World Methodist Peace Award for her work as a trade union activist and peace worker. In contrast, on the afternoon of Saturday 23 October 1993, a bomb exploded in Frizzell's Fish Shop, next door to Shankill Methodist Church, in one of the most notorious of all IRA operations, killing nine people in addition to one of the bombers.

At the heart of all its history, there remains a worshipping, faithful congregation who continue to work out what it means to be Christian in a changing city and changing world.